

Scripture Reading for October 13th 2019

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15 (NIV)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a messenger to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

Luke 17:11-19 (NIV)

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Sermon: “A Lesson in Gratitude”

What would make *you* shout for joy at the top of your voice? The obvious answer is some good news! Like if a doctor gave you an “all clear” after a life-threatening surgery or a medical test. Or if you aced an exam. Or if someone offered you your dream job. Or after the birth of a healthy child. Shouting for joy in such circumstances is an appropriate response. And in each case, it would be accompanied by a sense of gratitude to *someone*. If the issue was something about which you had previously *prayed* for help, then – it goes without saying that – giving thanks to *God* would certainly be in order. We see that in today’s gospel reading, which is really *two* stories, one of healing and one of salvation. Both are cause for an appropriate response of gratitude *to God* for what *God* has done *through Jesus*.¹ Let’s explore this a little together this morning.²

Of all the diseases one could dread in those days, leprosy was the worst. This generic term should not be simply be equated with Hansen’s disease, although it would obviously include that, but other unsightly skin conditions such as psoriasis and eczema are also implied. The consequence of having such a skin condition – which I will continue to call “leprosy” for convenience – was *social exclusion*.³ Those with leprosy lived *outside* of their communities and were mindful to be at least 50 yards downwind of other people. They were to cry out, “Unclean, unclean” to warn any who might approach them.⁴ Not surprisingly, those with leprosy tended to congregate together, and colonies positioned themselves strategically on major routes and intersections in order to appeal for charity from passers-by.⁵ Those with such skin conditions had little hope of a normal life, or of returning home, or of ever entering a synagogue.

That fear is also described in today’s Old Testament story of Naaman, a Sunday School favourite, and one which serves to demonstrate that such diseases knew no boundaries of social standing.⁶ Naaman was a *powerful* warrior, and hence an influential favourite of the king of Aram, but he was *powerless* in his plight of having leprosy. As we heard, although he was a proud man, he was prepared to do absolutely anything to get healed, including the humiliation of washing in a dirty river.

What we also see in Luke’s story is that exclusion from regular society brought a common bond to Jews and non-Jews. Normally Jews and Samaritans would not associate with each other. But a person with leprosy is an “outsider” in any culture and so kinships can form between them that would otherwise

¹ Only Luke reports this incidence.

² Note that this event takes place “on the way to Jerusalem,” see also Luke 9:51. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem in Luke 19:44. (See also Luke 13:31-35). Much has taken place in the intervening chapters, including the telling of many parables. This story indicates that Luke is still reflecting on the culmination of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem that is soon about to occur.

³ See Num 5:2-3.

⁴ See Lev 13:45-46; indeed, see 1-46. They were unholy, outcasts, and obviously ritually unclean. Such quarantined groups were exiled from the temple and from all forms of full communal worship.

⁵ See 2 Kings 7:3.

⁶ 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15; Luke obviously knew of this story: see Luke 4:27.

not arise. United in their misery, on seeing Jesus they call out with “one voice”⁷: “Master,⁸ have mercy on us.”⁹ This could have been a simple request for charity, rather than with any expectation of healing.¹⁰ Luke tells us “Jesus saw them” and he *didn’t* walk by on the other side.¹¹ Instead he tells them to show themselves to the priests who, according to Old Testament law,¹² had the authority to declare them “clean” and therefore fit to be welcomed back into normal society.¹³ Imagine their surprise at Christ’s instruction! They obeyed. And - so Luke tells us - “as they went, they were healed.”¹⁴

So far this has been a simple story of healing, but then comes Luke’s real punch line. One man, *seeing that he had been healed*,¹⁵ goes back praising God with a *loud* voice and falls on his face before Jesus in thankfulness. Luke then states with emphasis: “He was a Samaritan.”¹⁶ Samaritans were generally despised by Jews and regarded as culturally inferior and as heretics.¹⁷ Ironically, it is this hated Samaritan who shows gratitude to God – *not* the other nine, who presumably were Jews.¹⁸ Their common leprosy had united the ten men; their responses to their healing differentiated them.

This incident also resonates with the healing of the foreigner, Naaman, which Luke mentions earlier in chapter 4.¹⁹ Once Naaman realises he has been healed, he exclaims: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”²⁰ I think we can hear the echo of that sentiment on the lips of the healed Samaritan in Luke’s story. I think Luke’s allusion to Naaman is also so that another punch line can be re-heard from that story, when Elisha says: “Let Naaman come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”²¹ In other words, Luke’s story points to the *identity* of Jesus.

The healing of this dreaded skin disease *reverses* social exclusion and restores relationship and wholeness, what Jews termed *shalom*. Yet the Samaritan gets much more than physical healing; he also receives peace with God, which was far more than he dreamed possible. The words of Jesus, “Your faith

⁷ The Greek suggests they cried out in unison.

⁸ The title “master” in Greek is not *kyrios* (the Greek for “Lord” or “sir”), nor is it the Greek word for “Rabbi.”

⁹ Luke 17:13.

¹⁰ Though it is possible these people knew of Jesus’ reputation as a healer.

¹¹ An allusion to Luke 10:31,32 – the parable of the good Samaritan. (Luke seems to have an affinity for Samaria!)

¹² See Lev 14:1–32.

¹³ It is a mystery why the *Samaritan* would go to the Jewish priest to be declared clean! It is also unclear why Jesus later reprimanded the other nine (Luke 17:17) when going to show themselves to the priest is a sign of their obedience.

¹⁴ Luke 17:14b. This is not the first time in Luke’s gospel that Jesus heals a man with leprosy (see 5:12-14). In Luke, this functions to demonstrate the power and reality of God’s kingdom being present. Luke goes on to say, “The Kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21), implying, “Don’t you see it yet?”!

¹⁵ Luke 17:15.

¹⁶ Luke 17:16b, 18 (a “stranger”).

¹⁷ Samaritans were Jews from the old Northern kingdom who had intermarried with Assyrians at the time of the Assyrian conquest 700 years earlier.

¹⁸ Speculation is unwise and yet one wonders why *any* of the other nine did not return. Could it be that the priest advised them not to associate with the troublemaker Jesus, who was now a man marked out for death (Luke 13:31)? The parallels of the attitudes of the three characters in the parable of the good Samaritan cannot be overlooked (Luke 10:25-37).

¹⁹ Luke 4:27.

²⁰ 2 Kings 5:15.

²¹ 2 Kings 5:8.

has made you well,” can equally be translated as “your faith has saved you.”²² This man, who could never have worshipped in the Temple, is now fully reconciled to God. Consequently, in this story we get a strong indication that Christ’s kingdom-of-God message, of which healing was seen as a concrete sign of its presence,²³ is for *all* peoples, not just Jews. The response of gratitude and worship from the Samaritan also shows a *receptivity* for Jesus amongst “outsiders,” as Luke further details in Acts, in contrast to the hardness of heart from some of the Jewish leaders.²⁴

This is a message that calls *us* today to examine our own attitudes to what God *has* done and *is* doing. Do we pause to recognise *God* at work in our own lives? In the life of this church? And in Canada as a whole on this Thanksgiving weekend? And are we grateful or indifferent as we look back over another year in our lives?

Some may have good reason to give thanks to God - say for recovering from serious illness or surgery. But just as many don’t recover, even though they have prayed just as hard and just as often. Hearing the phrase “your faith has made you well” can, therefore, spark disappointment with God because that has not been your experience. I have preached on the complex question of “Why?” before and so won’t address that again today.²⁵ But a few points on “faith” are in order because no one is *entitled* to God’s mercy. Jesus is *not* concerned about the *quantity* of faith²⁶ and we have no idea as to the *quality* of faith that the 10 men with leprosy had.²⁷ Actually, this story suggests faith is *not* something we *possess*, but something *we practice on the way*.²⁸ We are to live our lives expressing our complete trust in God regardless of our life circumstances, which is not easy at times - I know! That’s why to *practice* gratitude is *evidence of faith* that God is indeed to be found *in* all things. Moreover, to intentionally give thanks is to turn our attention away from ourselves and that change in perspective can be life-changing and healing in itself. And it can also change the character of a congregation, when we come to church not with the sole attitude of getting “something out of it,” but to give thanks and praise to God! We do that weekly when we sing the doxology; and I trust we do that authentically. For when that happens, stewardship is transformed from fundraising to joyful giving. And the mission of the church changes from an ethical duty to the work of thankful hands and grateful hearts. Faith and gratitude are, then, closely related; in fact, one could say, faith *without* gratitude is not faith at all.

This story also challenges us to *recognise* the social barriers of exclusion and the walls we build to separate others different from ourselves. Jesus began dismantling those barriers and the later events within the book of Acts reveal how the apostles continued that process. As we hear afresh Jesus’

²² See also Luke 7:50; 8:48; 18:42. Like the prodigal son, the man “was dead and is alive again” (Luke 15:31), and the Greek word for “get up” (Luke 17:19) may also allude to the resurrection.

²³ Since this in the Jewish worldview was *holistic*; healing and salvation are strongly emphasised (and linked) in Luke.

²⁴ As John writes concerning Jesus: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to *all* who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11-12).

²⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Why-The-Death-of-John-the-Baptist.pdf> .

²⁶ Earlier, in Luke 17:6, Jesus speaks of the faith of a (tiny) mustard seed.

²⁷ Indeed, the Samaritan could be regarded as a man of different (or at least of unorthodox) faith.

²⁸ Luke 17:14b.

message to the included “outsider,” let us ask ourselves: “Do we perpetuate attitudes of exclusion or entitlement?” That word “entitlement” also contrasts with that of “gratitude” and brings into focus other common tendencies within our Western society, namely that of *immediacy* and *individualism*. We, as individuals, have an inclination to “want it all and we want it now.” Such a self-centered outlook flies in the face of gratitude. Thanksgiving is a good time to reflect on our own levels of pride and to acknowledging the necessary contribution of others.

To whom, then, do we owe gratitude today? There are many possible responses: parents, spouses, wider family members, friends, teachers, colleagues, doctors, nurses - the list goes on. And what about those who walked *along* side of us as we faced personal tragedies or hardships? Or those who helped us regain perspective when we were in danger of losing hope? While we can never repay all these people for their actions, we can at least express our thanks.

Important though that is, it is appropriate to also thank *God*. Henri Nouwen said:

“Perhaps nothing helps us make the movement from our little selves to a larger world than remembering God in gratitude. Such a perspective puts God in view in all of life, not just in the moments we set aside for worship or spiritual disciplines. [And] Not just in those moments when life seems easy.”

Moreover, the great reformed theologian, Karl Barth, was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is one of gratitude, *not* fear and trembling, *not* fear and dread, but thanksgiving. And in today’s story, the Samaritan was not grateful because it was his *duty* to do so, but because of his faith and experience of his master, Jesus Christ, who demonstrated mercy towards him. Gratitude and praise to God are *signs* of our faith *in* God, acknowledging him as the source of all good things and as recipients of his unmerited grace. As the psalmist reminds us: “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do *not* forget all his kind deeds.”²⁹ All this is *not* to make us feel guilty, as we can *all* be shown up for failing to express appropriate gratitude to God.³⁰ It is, however, a timely reminder on Thanksgiving Sunday that gratitude requires a *humility* of spirit.³¹ So what is our response to being touched by God’s generosity and grace in *our* lives?

In conclusion, there are various movements in this story, including separation, grace, and gratitude. The final movement is one of commission, to “get up and go”³² and take our new-found wholeness into the world bearing an ongoing witness to what Christ has done through a life of thanksgiving. May we do the same today. AMEN.

²⁹ Ps 103:2, NET. “benefits,” NIV, NRSV.

³⁰ Although, this story indicates gratitude is not a precondition for healing.

³¹ Which is the opposite of that attitude of “self-made” individuals who demand respect and display a sense of entitlement.

³² Luke 17:19. There is also the action of obedience and “seeing,” including seeing (recognising) God at work in Jesus.